NIAID

John R La Montagne

A leader of international research to control infectious diseases. He was deputy-director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Born Jan 1, 1943, in Mexico City, he died there of a pulmonary embolism on Nov 2, 2004, aged 61 years.

John La Montagne was one of the world's most influential biomedical scientists. At NIAID, he orchestrated research and public-health policymaking for almost 30 years in the war against emerging infectious diseases, such as AIDS and SARS, and old enemies, like influenza, tuberculosis, and malaria. He played an important part in the expansion of the institute, and provided a steadying hand through several crises of confidence in public health in the USA. In the mid-1980s, when doubts arose about the whooping cough vaccine, he organised the development, testing, and licensing of safer alternatives. And when severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) emerged, he moved swiftly to put research in place to work on preventive measures.

La Montagne was still at the centre of public-health issues when he collapsed 3 weeks ago. His judgment of two new research studies on intradermal influenza vaccination, which used only one-fifth of the dose in a normal intramuscular shot, was published online in the *NEJM* the day after his death. The editorial by La Montagne and co-author Anthony Fauci, director of NIAID, gave the intradermal vaccination qualified approval as a means of stretching supplies—especially if there were the risk of a pandemic. Fauci told *The Lancet* that, among La Montagne's many accomplishments, one area stands out. "His vision in pushing the research agenda to establish a substantial influenza research programme at NIAID was prescient given the threat that we now face with pandemic flu. Now, at least from a research standpoint, we are well positioned to future challenges. We would not be where we are today without his vision and constant pushing of the influenza agenda." Fauci also valued La Montagne highly for his personal qualities: "his death was one of the worst days in my life. He was one of the finest people anyone ever met."

La Montagne trained in microbiology at the University of Texas, Austin. He obtained a PhD from Tulane University in 1971 for research in bacterial genetics, then worked at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine on animal viruses in Julius Youngner's laboratory. There he learnt the intricacies of tissue culture, animal virus purification, and the vagaries of animal virology. He was recruited by NIAID in 1976 to initiate research on influenza and plan for the possibility of a pandemic. Youngner told *The Lancet*, "his career at NIAID prospered from the moment he set foot in the building because he had personal traits and administrative talents that very few people have. His feeling for this kind of work was quickly recognised."

La Montagne was chosen to lead NIAID's AIDS work in 1986, and was appointed director of a new division of microbiology and infectious diseases the next year. He had gained a platform for a formidable agenda. He accelerated work on vaccine development. His group showed the efficacy of the glycoconjugate vaccines to protect against *Haemophilus influenzae*, the then major cause of meningitis in the USA and a leading cause of permanent brain injury in infants. Clinical trials of a less reactogenic acellular pertussis vaccine came next in a collaborative and complex project involving the USA, Italy, and Sweden. It showed the superiority of acellular to whole-cell vaccines.

Meanwhile, La Montagne was developing strategies to deal with emerging viral infections. He presented them at a NIAID workshop in 1990, which led to a 1992 landmark report from the Institute of Medicine (*Emerging Microbial Threats to Health in the 21st Century*) that influenced the thinking of NIH and other government agencies. He went on to establish a group to work exclusively on sexually transmitted diseases, lobby successfully for the recognition of the resurgence of tuberculosis and a significant increase in funding, and argue for a major increase in support for research in malaria. His malaria work drew him into international collaboration, and he had a key role in the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria—an international effort involving research, control, and development agencies from the USA, Europe, and Africa.

La Montagne was appointed deputy-director of NIAID in 1998. 3 years later, the nature of the institute was transformed by the attacks on the USA on Sept 11. La Montagne had primary responsibility for the huge resources to address bioterrorism that followed, and was a leader in the development of the NIAID strategic research plan.

In 1968 he married Mary Elaine Elliott, who survives him.

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